DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 269 CS 506 222

AUTHOR Frith, Katherine T.
TITLE More Than We Bargained For: The Impact of Consumer Culture in Southeast Asia.
PUB DATE 1 Jun 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising; Consumer Economics; Consumer Protection; Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Cultural Influences; *Cultural Interrelationships; Developing Nations; Economic Development; Foreign Countries; International Trade; *Mass Media Effects
IDENTIFIERS Adverse Impact; Advertising Agencies; Advertising Effectiveness; *Asia (Southeast); Business Role; *Consumers; Cultural Preservation; *Culture Transmission; Multinational Corporations

ABSTRACT

Advertising by multinational corporations in Southeast Asia is generating a growing resistance to its perceived role in creating a "consumer culture" damaging to indigenous values systems. Critics of advertising in Southeast Asia argue that when multinational advertisers or their multinational advertising agencies move into this foreign setting, they bring a set of assumptions based on Western consumer culture, which may be inappropriate for developing Eastern nations. In addition to the concerns about the transfer of a consumer culture, consumer groups are concerned that advertisers are promoting products which are actually harmful to health, such as cigarette smoking. Government regulation is one solution to curb the possible deleterious effects of the consumer culture. For example, the government of Indonesia banned television advertising in 1981, and India has developed a series of regulations to prohibit the "sexploitation" of women by advertisers. While the critics in Southeast Asia are right to be concerned about protecting their traditional cultures, it should be noted that advertising is part of a larger industrial model that is being actively pursued by local governments in an effort to develop economically--advertising has historically provided the fuel for industrial and economic growth. (One table of data is included, and 22 references are appended.) (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED295269

MORE THAN WE BARGAINED FOR:

THE IMPACT OF CONSUMER CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

by

Katherine T. Frith
Associate Professor

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa 50010

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Katherine Frith

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS506222

Submitted to the Advertising Division of A.E.J.M.C.
Professional Freedom and Responsibility Division
for presentation at the 1988 Annual Conference in
Portland, Oregon

June 1, 1988

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to grow economically, most of the developing nations in Southeast Asia have tended to model their development on the industrialized Western countries. While this strategy has been quite successful in terms of economic growth, there is an emerging concern among government leaders and public interest groups throughout this area of the world, that contained in the industrial model is a set of Western values, which are quite alien to the traditional Eastern value systems. Advertising by multinational corporations in Southeast Asia is generating a growing resistance to its perceived role in creating a "consumer culture" damaging to indigenous values structures (Constantino, 1986; Hamdan Adnan, 1985; Anwar Faizal, 1985; The Consumer Association of Penang 1986).

Taking note of the concern expressed by local consumer and public interest groups, some governments in the region are instituting strict regulatory controls--particularly on television advertising. This paper reviews some of this criticism, examines its implications, describes some recent government regulatory action, and attempts to abstract some learning from this confrontation of cultures.

CRITICISMS OF ADVERTISING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In most of the Third World nations in Asia, developmental efforts have been modeled after the prototypes of growth promulgated by Western theorists and planners. The basic version of economic development that has been adopted as the policy ideal in these countries is-- industrialization. In this model,

industry is regarded as the leading sector and expanding investment in industry is expected to result in the formation of capital.

The problem with this model is that in its early phases, industrialization requires a society to become involved in mass production. But, as development proceeds, the process of industrialization also requires the society to change it's emphasis from a "production ethic" to a "consumption ethic" (Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1986; Ewen, 1976; Fox and Lears, 1983;).

In Southeast Asia the early phases of industrialization occurred without eliciting much public comment. In fact, Southeast Asia, which marketers usually define as including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Hong Kong, has, over the past decade, become the region of highest sustained economic growth in the world. This rapid economic growth, coupled with the fact that this region has a combined population one fifth larger than the U.S., has resulted in increased advertising activity in the region. According to Ogilvy and Mather (1985), this region has experienced a 48% increase in advertising expenditures from 1980 to 1984.

The Southeast Asian advertising industry is dominated by a handful of large multinational agencies, for the most part headquartered in London and New York. Whether trading under their own names or as major partners in regional firms, these agencies tend, not unexpectedly, to control the advertising budgets of the multinational corporations operating in Southeast Asia.

Advertising has not, by and large, been blamed for the growth in consumption. Neither has consumption itself been perceived as an ill, but rather as a necessary and desirable component of modernizing economies. However, there has been a growing concern on the part of public interest groups in the region about the possibly negative impact of multinational advertising on traditional Asian cultures (Omar, 1985; Goonasekera, 1987; Lubis, 1986; Constantino, 1986). Critics of advertising in Southeast Asia argue that when multinational advertisers or their multinational advertising agencies move into this foreign setting, they bring with them a set of assumptions based on a Western consumer culture. They charge that the invisible baggage accompanying Western advertising beliefs and practices threatens the very fabric of traditional Asian society. The Consumer Association of Penang describes it this way:

> A worrying trend is the growing influence of negative aspects of Western fashion and culture on the people in the Third World countries, including Malaysia. The advertising industry has created the "Consumer Culture" which has in fact become our "National Culture". Within this cultural system people measure their worth by the size of their house, the make of their car and the possession of the latest household equipment, clothes and gadgets.
>
> (CAP, 1986, p.108)

THE CONSUMER CULTURE

Criticism of the consumer culture is not a new phenomenon, and is not limited to Southeast Asia. Critics in the developed countries have long charged that in highly industrialized

countries, such as the U.S. or Great Britain, traditional values and culture have been replaced by a consumer culture (Dyer, 1982; Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1986; Ewen, 1976; Fox and Lears, 1983). In this consumer culture, continuous and conspicuous consumption is said to be the driving force and quality of life is judged by attaining objects, using them, throwing them away and acquiring others (Inglis, 1972). Galbraith goes so far as to charge that through the use of advertising, consumer wants are kept slightly in excess of income, offering the worker a compelling inducement to go into debt, and thereby adding to his reliability as a worker (1975, p.55).

While criticism of advertising and its inherent consumer culture is not new, criticism of multinational advertising appears to be gaining support from academics and public interest groups in Southeast Asia. The concern is that in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines where per capita income is less than a few thousand dollars (U.S.) per year there is no market for imported luxury products like "up-market brand name clothing, perfumes and personal items" (Robinson, 1986, p.12). In a recent article in the Communication Journal of the Philippines, author, Renato Constantino, voiced his concern in this way:

> "In Third World countries where poverty is virtually endemic, the distortion of consumption priorities as a result of Transnational Corporation (TNC) advertising and sales campaigns obviously has more serious consequences than in affluent societies. In the Philippines for example, where recent estimates place fully 70 percent of families below the poverty line, money sorely needed for food, shelter, and basic health is often squandered on tobacco, cosmetics, soft drinks and the latest fashion jeans. Although the

> targets of transnational corporation (TNC) sales are the elite and middle classes, their advertising is "democratically" heard via transistor radios, seen on billboards and to a lesser extent on television."
>
> (Constantino, 1987, p. 16)

In addition to the concerns about the transfer of a consumer culture to these developing nations, there is also growing criticism from consumer groups that multinational marketers are using advertising to promote products which are actually harmful to health (Consumer Association of Penang, 1986; International Organization of Consumer Associations, 1985). Many critics blame the transnational tobacco corporations and their advertising agencies for encouraging the growth of cigarette smoking in this area of the world (Motley, 1987; Constantino, 1986). Cigarette companies, whose sales are dropping in the West, are accused of looking at Asia as a market to increase lagging sales.

> "American cigarette exports nearly tripled in the last 10 years. According to the World Health Organization tobacco use in the Third World has been going up by 5 percent annually. Thailand had a 50 percent increase in smokers between 1970 and 1977; India a 90 percent increase in the past 20 years; and Pakistan, a 60 percent increase in 10 years."
>
> (Constantino, 1986, p. 17)

A CONFRONTATION OF VALUES

Underlying the entire debate about advertising and multinational marketing is the philosophical question regarding whether or not the "Culture of Consumption" is appropriate to a developing Eastern society.

While most critics in Southeast Asia would agree that

consumption is a necessary part of industralization and economic development, it is the transformation of consumer behavior in the shift from the traditional to mass market is perceived to be culturally destructive.

Underlying the debate on the negative effects of multinational advertising on Southeast Asian culture are the philosophical questions regarding the clash of cultural values inherent in Western-style advertising with those of the cultures in the region. In his Communication and Social Change in Developing Nations, Goran Hedebro (1982) contends that transnational companies are part of a larger economic and political system that promotes a life-style which is contingent on the individual acquisition of consumer goods. Seen from the point of view of the developing nations in Southeast Asia, however, this style of life may not take into account the welfare of the community as a whole. In the context of Southeast Asian culture, the fulfillment of family, group and community needs is more highly esteemed than the gratification of individual consumption goals. Yet so often consumer goods are advertised in the context of borrowed slices of decidedly Western life replete with individualistic and competitive motivational goals.

Florangel Rosario-Braid (1983) has outlined the prevailing Eastern communication and decision-behavior values, cultural beliefs and social structures that exist in most Asian societies. These are distinctly different from those of the West. Table 1 sets forth Rosario-Braid's Eastern values (paraphrased in the left column) and juxtaposes the contrasting values that predominate in the West.

TABLE 1

Eastern and Western Communication and

Decision-behavior Values Contrasted

EASTERN VALUE	WESTERN VALUE
Euphemistic or indirect discourse	Direct discourse; Getting to the point
"We" or group feeling	Individualism
Vertical identification with authority figures	Horizontal identification with class
Collaborative decision-making	Hierarchical decision-making
Fatalism	Determinism
Intuitive problem-solving	Logical problem solving

If the aim of multinational marketers is to confer value on their products and services, it will be achieved most efficiently and least damagingly if it is done within the values framework that exists in the cultural contexts of Southeast Asian markets (partly represented in the left column of Table 1). If, however, the cultural context of the Western institution of advertising (right-hand column) continues to prevail, it would seem that the gains in efficacy can only be achieved through the conformation of Southeast Asian values frameworks to that of the West. In

other words, for a purely Western style of advertising to succeed in Asia, Asian cultural values must first be swept away and replaced with "consumer culture" values--neither the most efficient, direct, nor desirable approach.

ONE SOLUTION -- GOVERNMENT REGULATION

In an effort to curb the possible, deleterious effects of the consumer culture, the government of Indonesia banned television advertising in 1981 (Anderson, 1984). India has developed a series of regulations regulations to prohibit the "sexploitation" of women by advertisers. State-run television there now prohibits the showing of female thighs, bare shoulders, kissing or any other "indecent representation" of women in commercials (AMIC, 1986).

Malaysia has created and elaborate system of government regulation aimed at the control of television advertising (Frith, 1987). The Ministry of Information's Advertising Code states that advertisements must project the Malaysian culture and identity. Commercials must be produced in Malaysia and the use of Non-Malaysian models is forbidden. The advertising code states:

> Adaptation or projection of foreign culture, either in the form of clothing, activity or behavior is not allowed.
>
> (Ministry of Information, 1983)

In Malaysia, all television commercials must be approved by the government censor board before they can be aired.

CONCLUSION

While the critics in Southeast Asia are right to be concerned about protecting their traditional cultures, it should be noted that advertising is part of a larger industrial model that is being actively perused by local governments in an effort to economically develop. Advertising has historically provided the fuel for industrial and economic growth.

The question posed by the critics is not so much whether advertising per se is good or bad, but whether the invisible baggage, the culture of consumption, that accompanies advertising, is appropriate to a developing Eastern nation.

As more and more multinational corporations look to Southeast Asia as a market to expand into, it is essential that this question be addressed. If, indeed, Western advertising's role is to promulgate the consumer culture globally, the prognosis for it is not very encouraging. It is nothing short of cultural imperialism. If Western multinationals continue to remain unresponsive to criticism, they may find themselves being legislated out of Southeast Asian markets.

If, on the other hand, Western multinational advertising agencies can succeed in pioneering effective and culturally appropriate advertising in Southeast Asia, by sparking research on indigenous communication models and social psychological paradigms based on an Eastern values framework, they may provide a service that is of broader value than to just global marketers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Michael. (1984), Madison Avenue in Asia: Politics and Transnational Advertising. N.J: Associated University Presses.

Asian Mass Communication Bulletin. (1987), "Indian Bill to Curb Indecency," 17(2),12.

Boorstin, Daniel J. (1986), "The Rhetoric of Democracy," in Mass Media: Industries and Issues, Robert Atwan, Barry Orton and William Vesterman, eds. N.Y: Random House.

Constantino, Renato. (1986), "Mass Culture: Communication and Development." Philippine Journal of Communication, 13-26.

Dyer, Gillian. (1982), Advertising Communication. London: Methuen.

Consumer Association of Penang. (1986), Selling Dreams: How Advertising Misleads Us." Penang, Malaysia: CAP.

Ewen, Stuart. (1976), Captains of Consciousness New York: McGraw Hill.

Faizal, Anwar. (1984), "Advertising and Changing Patterns of Culture," unpublished manuscript. Singapore: AMIC.

Fox, Richard and Lears. (1983), The Culture of Consumption. New York: Pantheon.

Frith, Katherine T. (1987), "Social and Legal Constraints on Advertising in Malaysia," Media Asia, 14(2).

Goonasekera, Anura. (1987), "The Influence of Television on Cultural Values with Special Reference to Third World Countries," Media Asia, 14(1), 7-12.

Hamdan Adnan. (1981), "Adverts and Us." Berita. Kuala Lumpur: FOMCA, Nov. 1981.

Hedebro, Goran. (1982), Communication and Social Change in Developing Nations: A Critical View. Ames: Iowa State University Press.

Inglis, Fred. (1972(, The Imagery of Power: A Critique of Advertising. London: Heinemann.

Leiss, William; Kline, Stephen; Jhally, Sut. (1986), Social Communication in Advertising. New York: Methuen.

Lubis, Mochtar. (1986), "Cultural Integrity: Free and Balanced Information Flow." Media Asia. Vol. 13, No.2.

Ministry of Information. (rev. 1983), "Advertising Code," Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Angkasapuri, 2-3.

Molley, Susan. (1987), "Burning the South: U.S. Tobacco Companies in the Third World." Multinational Monitor.July/August, 1987.

Naipaul, V.S. (1981), Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey. New York: Viking, Penguin.

Omar, Asmah Haji. (1985), "Mass Communication and Its Effects on Education and Traditional Culture in Malaysia," Media Asia, 12(1), 11-20.

Robinson, Chris. (1986), "Multinationals Insensitive to Asia." Asian Advertising and Marketing. June, 1986.

Rosario-Braid, Florangel. (1983), "Toward a Theory of Organizational Communication: An Inquiry into Philippine Values," in Communication Research and Cultural Values, Dissanayake and Said, eds. Singapore: AMIC.